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PROSECUTOR CLOSES DOOR TO PRESS ON KING CLAIMS

(Eds: adds call for federal investigation)

MEMPHIS, Tenn, Dec 17 (Reuter) - A prosecutor held a news conference Friday to say he wouldn't talk to the press any longer about claims James Earl Ray did not kill civil rights leader Martin Luther King until an investigation is completed.

Shelby County Attorney General John Pierotti told reporters his office and the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation would investigate reports that a Memphis businessman arranged King's assassination.

The businessman, Lloyd Jowers, interviewed on the ABC-TV programme "Prime Time Live," demanded immunity from prosecution before testifying about his role.

The Rev. Joseph E. Lowery, president of the civil rights group King lead until his assassination, asked the Justice Department after the broadcast to investigate the assertions that the real killers have never been found, The New York Times said in its Saturday editions.

Lowery, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said there were enough unanswered questions about King's death and enough lingering questions about a conspiracy that the report had to be investigated, the newspaper said.

King was killed April 4, 1968, on a Memphis hotel balcony after coming to the city to support strikers.

Ray, who initially confessed to the slaying, has since maintained that he is innocent. He is serving a 99-year prison sentence.

King's family have declined to comment on case. But the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who was with King at the time of the shooting, said Sunday he has always suspected a conspiracy.

The latest episode came to light last weekend, when The Observer in Britain reported a Memphis businessman confessed to arranging King's murder in exchange for a \$100,000 payment from two other men, including one with alleged links to the Mafia.

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